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CPYRGHT Hushed-Up Death Rides

AMONG recurring stories that a number of Soviet cosmonauts perished on the edge of space before Yuri Gagarin's historic flight last year, one of the latest is a five-failure report from the North American Newspaper Alliance. It lists the approximate dates of each ill-fated flight, naming the pilots in three of them.

A Drew Pearson column published on this page April 21, 1961, dealt with the same type of material, purportedly from "American agents." Later it triggered some sharp questions by Iowa's Senator Hickenlooper at a session of the senate space committee. A CIA space expert insisted that Gagarin had been the first man in orbit, but this did not contradict the possibility that others may have tried earlier and never made it.

For purposes of a "fact" comparison, we checked the Pearson list against the new material from NANA's Oton Ambroz. There was one occurrence partially in common. Drew Pearson mentioned an unsuccessful flight in "early 1958" by one Terenty Shigorin. NANA's story gave the date as February, 1959.

Both of Pearson's other cited cases came before that time. All of NANA's other four followed it. The last, purportedly May 17, 1961, involved the launching of a man and woman in

one capsule. Tracking stations in a number of countries, including some in the West, supposedly even tape-recorded a radio-voice message from the doomed cosmonauts.

If instances like these are true and documentable, it is difficult to see what anyone but Russia stands to gain by keeping them suppressed at the time they happen or long afterward. The word gets out regardless, accurately or otherwise. The Free World's tracking and detection capabilities thus remain no secret. Their results might just as well be timely.

Aside from the strong element of news or propaganda interest, a manned space launch that proves fatal can hardly rate as something of tremendous significance to the world. The cases in question do underscore a well-established fundamental difference between the Russian approach to space flight publicity and our own.

But whatever the truth about them is, it also renews confidence in the American method of cautious, step-by-step advancement into space with human safety a paramount concern. Most of us would rather lag for a while in the trailblazing than lead it with a grisly pattern of needless death — confirmed or not — on the record behind each step.